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ABSTRACT

Senior theater programs can act as catalysts for involvement of senior citizens, promoting self-confidence and fostering creativity. Myths about older people (concerning senility, incompetence, decline in intelligence, learning, rigidity, and retirement) should be recognized as inaccurate stereotypes and as barriers to active and productive lives. Theatrical experiences for seniors can be rewarding, offering an outlet for creative expression, increasing self-confidence and feelings of self-worth, offering new peer networks, and enhancing emotional and physical well-being. The direction and production of senior theater productions requires some special considerations, including: factors affecting listening and hearing, reinforcement of short term memory, commitment to the production, transportation, socializing and rehearsals, rehearsal space, schedules, flexibility regarding seniors' other commitments, sets, costumes, prompters, blocking, and purpose. (SR)

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BEYOND THE PORCH, BENEATH THE LIGHTS: OUTLETS FOR SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE AGING--THEATRE FOR SENIORS

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BEYOND THE PORCH, BENEATH THE LIGHTS:

OUTLETS FOR SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE

AGING--THEATRE FOR SENIORS

Youth is a work of Nature,
Old Age is a work of art.
Anonymous

What can we, as professionals in the field of Communication and Theatre Arts, do to promote self-confidence among our Senior citizens and foster creativity? Research indicates that the life span of our society is increasing. With that increase, arises the need for continued involvement and activity among Seniors. Senior theatre programs can provide the needed catalyst for involvement and creativity.

This paper will first examine myths that surround our older citizens and communication. Secondly, a review of the role of theatrical experiences for Seniors will be discussed. Finally, we will look at considerations when implementing a Senior theatre program. Carl V. Carmichael, Carl H. Botan and Robert Hawkins in their book, Human Communication and the Aging Process, borrow from gerontologist Anthony Traxler (1980) in summarizing fifteen representative myths which society holds toward the older citizen (83-87). Of these fifteen, we will examine six which reflect upon the communication and performance abilities of these citizens and look at the effect these myths have upon society and the older performer. These myths include: (1) senility, (2) incompetence, (3) decline in intelligence, (4) learning myth, (5) rigidity and (6)the retirement myth.

As a person grows older the myth of senility becomes his or her greatest barrier. It is perceived that since they are no longer young, it must mean that they are not in complete control of their mental abilities and are losing touch with reality - thus they are losing their minds. Over 80 percent of the aging show no signs of impaired mental functioning associated with "senility" (Edinberg 18). Gerontologists state that senility is a disease which affects only about .5% of those over 65 (Carmichael et al. 84). Thus, by taking time to communicate with our older citizens we may find a wealth of knowledge and experiences that may help us gain new insights into our own life.

The myths of incompetence, decline in intelligence and learning are related myths. Each of these myths involve the self-concept and the feeling of self-worth associated with the older citizen. As society buys into these myths, we assist in breaking down the self-esteem and value these individuals place upon themselves. The processes involved in the aspects of learning and intelligence may take longer to accomplish, but repeated research in the field of gerontology states that healthy people who stay mentally active need not experience any intelligence decline well into the aging years. Many older citizens remain in control of their lives and continue learning throughout life. As one older American stated when visiting my class in Communicating with the Elderly, "The process of learning is never ending. Each day I learn something I didn't know before."

In a study by Joy H. Dohr and Linda A. Forbess (1986) the role of creativity and aging was examined. Dohr and Forbess found that sometimes significant growth was noted during later adulthood beginning in the late 50's or 60's (131). When they inquired why these Seniors felt this occurred, the Seniors replied with, "had more time to think," "had time to do the activity," "were more prepared" (131). As one 75-year old man stated, "I've finally matured; I can put ideas and experiences together in new ways that I could not have done before" (131). Provided with the opportunity to continue learning, these citizens may be a welcome asset to the community.

The belief that as a person becomes older he or she become more set in their way and less likely to be open to new ideas can be harmful to the senior citizen. Many of these citizens have lived through numerous changes in their lives and have adjusted or shown no resistance. We are finding that more and more, Seniors are participating in continuing education programs, community projects, volunteer programs and self-enrichment programs. By stereotyping the senior citizens we are not allowing ourselves to exchange ideas and communicate with them to the fullest extent.

When retirement approaches, no longer do we see our older americans withdrawing from society and settling for the rocking chair. Seniors today are becoming more actively involved and pursuing interests they had to abandon when younger or, better yet, trying something they always wanted, but never felt they could. Growing older is no longer something to be ashamed of,

but something to look forward too. As 67-year old Liz Carpenter, Lady Bird Johnson's secretary, stated, "Aging has become very stylish. All the best people are doing it" (Time 68).

These myths concerning the older american are barriers which affect the communication network. By recognizing these for what they are, stereotypical myths, we as facilitators of communication and performance can act as a catalyst to aid the older citizen live active and productive lives.

Today media is beginning to look at our "Seniors" in a new light. No longer are we experiencing the total exposure of the younger generation. This new exposure has assisted society in seeing active and productive Seniors. The creative energy that may have been on decline in the middle years due to family and job commitments now can be re-kindled. While the desire to pursue these interests may be there, the outlets for this creativity may not. Most programs for Seniors are directed toward increased socialization or physical well-being aspects. In visiting with a Senior last fall involved in Waterloo, Iowa's Theatre Elderway she stated, "we have programs which take care of our bodies if they are sick or injured, but what about taking of our spiritual needs? That is what this play has done for me. I feel worth something." Dohr and Forbess support this concept by suggesting that there is a need for aesthetic programs that foster the integrating of the self and the product which permit the Senior to interpret and develop growth through exposing their new ideas and interests (136). Another Senior involved in the present Theatre Elderway production stated, "This has given me

confidence in myself and in what I can do. I have a new sense of self-worth." With this in mind, those of us in the communication profession will be able to better view the impact of performance and its impact upon self-esteem.

Performance in everyday life may take an informal or formal perspective. In regard to this project, we will take a closer look into the performance of Theatre as an outlet for creative expression and self-esteem among Seniors. Theatre groups are established as another outlet for the Senior who chooses to remain active within the arts. As Cornish and Kase stated, "Older Americans bring with them a range of talent and skills; they can contribute to theatre projects as artists, workers, students, teachers, creators, as well as audiences (foreward). As the growing number of Seniors remain productive longer, enjoy good health and have increased energy, their ability to enjoy the arts will increase also.

The use of drama can serve as a very rewarding outlet for Seniors. It should be mentioned that dramatic participation may take many forms of creative expression from improvisation to scripted performance. For expediency, this paper will only look at scripted performance for Seniors. Gray reported finding the following benefits derived from inclusion of scripted performances for Seniors: opportunity to provide service for others, increased self-confidence, learning to function as a group, providing an acceptable emotional outlet and improving their mental picture in regard to physical ailments (4, 5).

Our Seniors, in the past, have been accustomed to having services provided to them. Through participation in theatre they feel that they have in return been of service to someone else. This is a very rewarding aspect for them and helps create a sense of self-worth.

Another factor increasing this sense of worth is the increased self-confidence these performers acquire through participation in theatre. Through their participation, these Seniors exercise their mental capacities and find they have some goal to strive toward. One of the largest successes for the participants is the memorization of lines. Gray found they were "delighted to disprove the old adage that 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'" (4).

Participating in a theatrical experience gives Seniors a chance to function in a group. Quoting one of the participants, "This has helped my understanding of other people and how well they can do when they think they can't." There are times when these citizens may have been isolated and had little opportunity for group participation. The cooperation, organization, and friendships created through group functioning provide Seniors with a new network of peers. According to project directors of Waterloo, Iowa's Theatre Elderway, those members of the cast from last fall are still meeting on a regular basis even though the troop closed over six months ago. The close network created by their participation has given them another network to gain acceptance and a feeling of self-worth. "New friends" add to the social networks of Seniors.

Finally, emotional and physical well-being were enhanced by participation in drama. Theatre served as an outlet to express feelings that otherwise may have be suppressed or unacceptable. Although direct participation did not cure physical ailments, it did serve to distract their thoughts concerning their ailments and cause them to discuss them less.

Throughout this paper we have examined the attributes of our Seniors as participatory members of performance. Whether through informal or formal networks, the story they share with us is irreplaceable. Marni Swartz describes a story as a gift from the teller to the listener (607). As the listener responds, the storyteller recognizes this exchange and a type of intimacy is created. This intimacy is also recognized by the performer of drama. In regard to our Seniors, when they open this intimate portion of themselves to us -- they are giving to us a part of themselves. This intimacy creates a bond between the Senior and the receiver. Sandra Stahl states that this bonding is a "bond of understanding" and can be very powerful (47). Whether through story or drama -- each life has become interwoven with one another.

This understanding is represented in the account of one young gentleman in regard to his mother's performance with Waterloo's Theatre Elderway. Upon seeing his mother portray a widowed woman who must make the decision to leave her home and move to smaller quarters he remarked, through tears, "I never realized how hard this has been for Mom. (She was recently widowed herself and in the process of moving). Now I understand.

I was blind to it before, but now I see how hard it's been. This has been better for her than any therapy she may have had." This bond forms between the audience and the performer. Roberta Fusaro, reporting on the Sharon Senior Center group in Massachusetts, quotes audience members as saying, "I was feeling so poorly, and now I'm feeling much better." "You've given us hope today, a little push to think that maybe we could do something like this." (3).

Senior theatre is a rewarding and beneficial experience for all involved. Directing and producing a Senior theatre production can not exist without some special considerations. Those considerations include:

1. Listening. When directing Seniors we must consider the possibility of physical problems related to listening as well as external factors which affect this sensory skill. In my experience with Theatre Elderway I have found that unless we practice concentration skills small external noises can distract the performer and cause poor performance. I also found that I needed to take into consideration hearing loss. For example, one performer could not hear the prompter simply because the sound was not directed to the side where the hearing aid was in use.
2. Memory. While long term memory is very good for most Seniors, short term needs more work and reinforcement. I found that there were times in which we simply ran lines in order to hear them over and over again. Repetition worked as a memory aid. It is important to note also, that while the Senior may falter with a line at the beginning it is not necessarily due to

memory loss. There are times that they are simply working to retrieve the line from their memory center.

3. Commitment. It is important to explain at the very beginning in clear and precise language the amount of time it will take to get your performance ready for actual public showing. I found that even after explaining this, some of the early cast still didn't realize the scope of dedication it would take and resigned their parts after two or three weeks of rehearsal time. Seniors also are very busy people. They may find that with their schedules of volunteerism, other social engagements, etc. they just do not have the time it takes to put toward a production.

4. Transportation/Time. Many Seniors do not enjoy driving in the evening hours of the day. If possible, schedule rehearsals in the afternoons when transportation is available.

5. Socializing/Rehearsal. Rehearsal time may be the highlight of the day for some of your performers. This is the time they meet and visit with other peers. It is important to allow for some of this to happen, but keep them on task and remind them that rehearsal needs to be accomplished first.

6. Rehearsal space. If possible try to find a rehearsal space that is central to all those involved in your cast. Also, consider the layout of the building and any obstacles which may hinder their access to the rehearsal space.

6. Schedules. Because Seniors are extremely busy people, it is important to have a schedule made up in advance and to try to abide to it as close as possible.

7. Flexibility. This is a very important consideration to me. This flexibility needs to come from the director more than the Seniors. I have found that several of my cast members were caregivers to their older relatives. One of my cast members who was 78, was caregiver to her 90 year old aunt. At the time of our opening performance her aunt was very ill and in the hospital. I needed to be considerate of her needs to assist her aunt while still trying to remain dedicated to the performance. We worked out a flexible schedule at this point with the rest of the cast and she worked on her own to keep refreshed.

8. Set. In constructing the set for this production I needed to keep in mind that it needed to be portable. We were a touring show with ten performance sites booked. The responsibility of loading and transporting the set was that of the cast, project directors and myself. Therefore we selected an alternative method of design using Dow Chemical Company Blueboard. This is a lightweight foam material and is very durable. We constructed tri-fold panels and one or two persons could easily move it with no difficulty.

9. Costumes. Keeping in mind mobility, costumes needed to be loose and easy to access. We worked for a layering effect in which they simply had to remove articles or only add exterior layers.

10. Prompters. This is the first production that I used prompters. More than being a necessity, they were a security blanket. There were many evenings when the prompter simply followed the script and didn't have to cue a line. Having them

there added a sense of security for the cast, which assisted them in performing better.

11. Blocking. I discovered early that the intricate blocking designs I had planned would not work. We worked toward line composition, levels and visual placement and tossed out a lot of movement. Time and endurance were of consideration here.

12. Purpose. When we began our rehearsals, we developed two reasons for doing this performance. They constantly remained with us and served as a guide. First, we were going to have a good time and provide our audience with entertainment. Second, we wanted to dispel some of the myths surrounding aging. Society needed to see that Seniors are capable and useful citizens.

When given the opportunity, Seniors can be a very positive asset to our discipline. They bring with them new experiences, past knowledge and an eagerness to succeed. As they told me, "Tell them to go for it. Take one day at a time. Make tomorrow better than today. Do your best, that's all that matters."

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